



Sermon, March 4, 2018  
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Coburg and Junction City United Methodist Churches

Sermon Series: Tending the Path  
“The Ways of Cleansing”

**Scriptures:**

**Psalms 51**

*To the leader. A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.*

- 1 Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your steadfast love;  
according to your abundant mercy  
blot out my transgressions.
- 2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin.
- 3 For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.
- 4 Against you, you alone, have I sinned,  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you are justified in your sentence  
and blameless when you pass judgment.
- 5 Indeed, I was born guilty,  
a sinner when my mother conceived me.
- 6 You desire truth in the inward being;<sup>[a]</sup>  
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.
- 7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
- 8 Let me hear joy and gladness;  
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
- 9 Hide your face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities.
- 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right<sup>[b]</sup> spirit within me.
- 11 Do not cast me away from your presence,  
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
- 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing<sup>[c]</sup> spirit.
- 13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
and sinners will return to you.
- 14 Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,  
O God of my salvation,

**Joel 2:12-17** New Revised Standard  
Version (NRSV)

- 12 Yet even now, says the Lord,  
return to me with all your heart,  
with fasting, with weeping, and with  
mourning;
- 13 rend your hearts and not your  
clothing.  
Return to the Lord, your God,  
for he is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger, and abounding in  
steadfast love,  
and relents from punishing.
- 14 Who knows whether he will not turn  
and relent,  
and leave a blessing behind him,  
a grain offering and a drink offering  
for the Lord, your God?
- 15 Blow the trumpet in Zion;  
sanctify a fast;  
call a solemn assembly;
- 16 gather the people.  
Sanctify the congregation;  
assemble the aged;  
gather the children,  
even infants at the breast.  
Let the bridegroom leave his room,  
and the bride her canopy.
- 17 Between the vestibule and the altar  
let the priests, the ministers of  
the Lord, weep.  
Let them say, “Spare your people,  
O Lord,  
and do not make your heritage a  
mockery,

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<p>and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance. 15 O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. 16 For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. 17 The sacrifice acceptable to God<sup>[a]</sup> is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. 18 Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, 19 then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.</p>	<p>a byword among the nations. Why should it be said among the peoples, “Where is their God?”</p>
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**Matthew 6:16-18** New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Concerning Fasting

16 “And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. 17 But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, 18 so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.<sup>[a]</sup>

### **Scripture Reading**

Joel 2:12-17

### **Reflection**

“The Ways of Cleansing: Part 1”

*Opening Question: Has there ever been a time in your life when you did something or experienced something that made you feel so dirty that you had to go home and take a nice long shower or bath?*

When I was a volunteer firefighter in my younger years, I would come home from fires reeking of smoke and covered in soot. I would wash myself thoroughly, clean out my nose to get rid of the smell, put on something sweet-smelling. But there have also been times when I was in a conversation with somebody that was just awful, and I felt badly about it afterwards, and I wanted to wash myself of the whole thing. You ever felt like that? Maybe you just wanted to erase the whole event and start all over?

One of the spiritual practices that Jesus taught was Confession and Repentance. Repentance is all about engaging in a clear and careful examination of the direction your life is taking, and seeking a better way. Someone has said, “a dead-end is simply another place to turn around.”

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Repentance takes a dead-end and makes it into a cul-de-sac wherein we can seek a new direction in life.

Following Jesus is much more than adding his ideas to our overcrowded collection of good thoughts and helpful aphorisms for living. It requires a reordering of our priorities and challenges our most basic assumptions about what is important in life. Throughout his ministry, Jesus challenged and called into question the prevailing assumptions and practices of power and domination, value of persons, relationships between rich and poor, men and women, clean and unclean. His call to repentance was not just a one-time event. It was a lifelong practice.

The most basic form of confession and repentance involves the daily examination of the things we have thought, said and done that day. Placing them up against the life, teaching and conversations of Jesus provides a good measure of what path we are on, and where we are on that path. The act of repentance, especially when done daily, serves as a continuous course correction for the path our life takes.

To seek out the spiritual life usually requires that we redirect our lives in some way. Whether it is due to a personal crisis, or the need to completely reorder our priorities, or the need to disentangle ourselves from social systems that are degrading, violent or dehumanizing, a spiritual life is at core a redirected life. Jesus speaks of repentance 25 times in the first three Gospels. So it is that it is usually the first spiritual practice any person must engage in when they start out on the spiritual path.

St. Ignatius of Loyola developed a simple prayer that keeps self-examination in the forefront of our awareness each day. It is called the Prayer of Examen. It is a simple 5-step process:

1. Become aware of God’s presence.
2. Review the day with gratitude.
3. Pay attention to your emotions.
4. Choose one feature of the day and pray from it.
5. Look toward tomorrow.

## “The Ways of Cleansing”

In summary: Presence, Gratitude, Attention, Choose, Tomorrow.

**Scripture Reading**                      Matthew 6:16-18

**Reflection**                              “The Ways of Cleansing: Part 2”

### **Fasting**

As Jesus began his ministry, he retreated to a place in the wilderness for a time of prayer and fasting. Fasting is a practice that has been linked with the pursuit of spiritual insight in cultures all around the world. It was practiced in concert with deep meditation by Siddhartha Gautama in his search for enlightenment; it formed a regular part of the practices of *sannyasins* (spiritual devotees) in India for centuries; and in the Bible, it was used not only in conjunction with acts of repentance and confession of sins, but also as a means to purify oneself and prepare for a deeper encounter with God.

The constant need for food occupies much of our time and energy as humans. In fact, it is the primary concern of all living beings. By temporarily stepping away from the all-consuming need to consume, our mental energy and attention can be directed to practices such as prayer, meditation and contemplation. As the body no longer needs to direct its energy resources to the acquisition, preparation, eating and digesting of food, it has more energy available for the work of the brain as it engages in these exercises of the mind.

But there is another important aspect of fasting, and that is its relationship to confessing the rotten state of affairs of our lives, or even of our nation, and seeking to change our ways. On April 30, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued the following Proclamation for a National Day of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer:

We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven. We have been preserved, the many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the

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deceitfulness of our hearts that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to God that made us. It behooves us, then to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.

I believe that we are at just such a time in which we need to repent of our national sins of our gluttonous consumption of the world's natural resources, of our unmitigated worship of guns and other weapons, our devotion to the ways of violence, of the rich and powerful thinking they can use and abuse people for their own profit or sexual pleasure, of practicing politics devoid of morality or ethics. It's time that we as a whole people rise up and pray Psalm 51:

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.

Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me.

Confession, repentance, prayer and fasting: these are the ways of cleansing. I think it's time for a national bath. What about you?